DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 309 TM 027 778

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TITLE Setting Education Standards High Enough.
INSTITUTION Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, GA.
PUB DATE 1997-06-16
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Assessment Conference of the Council of Chief State School Officers (Colorado Springs, CO, June 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Cooperation; *Elementary Secondary Education; Expectation; *Standards; *State Programs
IDENTIFIERS High Stakes Tests; *National Assessment of Educational Progress; Standard Setting; Third International Mathematics and Science Study

ABSTRACT

Each state is going to set its own education standards, but unless state leaders talk to each other, there are going to be huge unexplained differences in state performance standards for student achievement. What states say they want their students to be taught is quite similar, but they appear to have very different standards for what students should learn. States that have performance standards for student achievement report a bewildering range of results. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national testing program at grades 4, 8, and 12, suggest that the standards of some states and those of the NAEP are so different as to make comparisons extremely difficult or impossible. Some states, notably Kentucky, Maryland, Connecticut, Delaware, and New Hampshire, have set high standards for their students. Few states, however, have been willing to have both high standards and high stakes examinations, International results on student achievement can tell the nation and the individual states a lot of knowledge about how high standards really are, and this information will be available when the Third International Mathematics and Science Study releases its data. State representatives need to examine these data and then get together to clarify the range of standards and expectations for learning. (Contains two tables.) (SLD)

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This paper is prepared for the:
CCSSO Annual Assessment Conference in Colorado Springs
June 16, 1997

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Setting Education Standards High Enough

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Can We Talk? *. . . about how to make education standards high enough in your state.*

Joan Rivers' trademark question, "Can we talk?" is exactly what education, government and business leaders need to be asking each other—and their counterparts in other states. If we don't talk to each other, the odds are great that 1) many states will set low performance standards for student achievement despite lofty sounding pronouncements about high standards, and 2) the standards for student achievement will be so dramatically different from state to state that they simply won't make sense. Some states will have high expectations, others will have low ones, and the public will be justifiably confused and cynical.

For example, what if one state claims that more than 80 percent of its eighth grade students meet its achievement standard for mathematics, and in another state, less than 30 percent of the students are doing well enough by its standard? Or what if one state says that almost 90 percent of its third graders are reading well enough to meet its standard, and another state reports that less than 30 percent of its third graders are? If the citizens of these states became aware of these differences wouldn't they ask, "What's going on here?" Well, these are not theoretical situations or numbers. These are actual student achievement results now being reported. They show dramatically why "Can we talk?" is the question that leaders in these states need to be asking each other.

Each State Will Set its Own Education Standards

Each state is going to set its own education standards. Some may argue this isn't the most efficient way to do business. After all, isn't eighth grade mathematics in Oregon essentially the same as eighth grade mathematics in Florida? Isn't good reading in the third grade in South Dakota the same as good reading in the third grade in South Carolina? The answers are most likely "yes," but in our system, where states and local districts are responsible for education, the standards are going to be set by states in nearly every case. This is a fact, but it is also a fact that unless state leaders talk with each other, we are going to have huge differences in state performance standards for student achievement that make no sense and cannot be explained.

What States Say They Want Their Students to be Taught Is Quite Similar, But States Appear to Have Very Different Standards For How Much Students Should Learn

States are certainly different, but when they put on paper what they want their students to be taught in subjects such as reading, writing, mathematics and science, there is much agreement. The wording may be somewhat different, but what states want students to be taught in these core subjects is strikingly similar, and this is not bad. If each

state had strikingly different expectations of what eighth graders should be taught in mathematics, for example, we would have cause for concern. The fact that there is much agreement, for many subjects and at many grade levels, is a strength of our system. Each state has taken its own path to reach similar conclusions, and each state therefore has some ownership in these similar statements about what should be taught.

The dramatic differences are not so much in what states believe should be taught but in how much they expect students to learn.

If what is taught in eighth grade mathematics in one state is much the same as what is taught in eighth grade mathematics in another state, how do we explain that one state has 84 percent of its students meeting its performance standards for student achievement while another state has 13 percent of its students meeting its standard? Do we really believe that this dramatic difference is in what these eighth grade students know about mathematics? Or is it possible that much of the difference is because one state has a low performance standard for student achievement and the other has a higher standard? What should the citizens of these two states think about these results? If we believed that one state had nearly nine of 10 of its eighth grade students meeting a high performance standard in mathematics, shouldn't most states be sending mathematics experts to this state to see how it is so successful?

States that have performance standards for student achievement report a bewildering range of results. For example, in eighth grade mathematics the percentages of students meeting state performance standards include these actual results—13 percent, 29 percent, 39 percent, 47 percent, 68 percent, 70 percent and 84 percent (Table 1). The results for reading are even more "unusual" (Table 2). We would not expect standards set by each state to be the same or produce the same results, but do these dramatic differences make sense?

If this sounds confusing, try to explain this additional fact (see also Table 1). Delaware has the lowest percentage of students meeting its eighth grade mathematics standard (13 percent). Georgia has one of the highest percentages of students meeting its eighth grade standard (83 percent). Recently both states had their students take the same eighth grade mathematics test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The eighth graders in Delaware, where 13 percent of its students met the state's own standard, scored ***higher*** than students in Georgia where 83 percent of its eighth graders met its own standard.

These dramatically different and confusing results, based on state performance standards for student achievement, demonstrate why leaders in states need to talk with their colleagues in other states. And there is another important reason.

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress Suggest That States are Setting Low Standards

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is a national testing program at grades 4, 8, and 12 that includes performance standards for student achievement. The National Assessment performance standards are "basic" (not good enough), "proficient" (good enough) and "advanced" (superior). States that participate can use the National Assessment to get state-by-state comparisons and to find out how many of their students perform at the basic, proficient or advanced levels. These performance standards were established in a comprehensive process by a citizens' panel of educators, parents, legislators, governors, and business and civic leaders.

The National Assessment performance standards for student achievement are not low standards. For example, many states report that 70 percent and 80 percent of

Table 1
States with Performance Standards for Seventh and Eighth Graders Compared with National Assessment Results for Eighth Graders (Mathematics, Public Schools)

State	Percent of Students Meeting State Proficiency Standard * 1994-1995	Percent of Eighth Grade Students Meeting National Assessment Proficient Standard 1992[1]	1996
Connecticut	47	26	31
Delaware	13	15	19
Georgia	83	13	16
Illinois	83	NA	NA
Kentucky	29	14	16
Louisiana	80 (7th Grade)	7	7
Maryland	48	20	24
Michigan	55 (7th Grade)	19	28
New Jersey	39	28	NA
North Carolina	68	12	20
Oklahoma	70	21	NA
Oregon	84	NA	26
South Carolina	68	15	14

* See page 7 for definition of proficiency standards.

[1] The 1992 results presented here reflect adjustments made by the National Assessment of Educational Progress because of technical problems in previously reported 1992 results. (*NAEP 1996 Mathematics Report Card for the Nation and the States*, February 1997).

their students meet their own performance standards for student achievement on the state tests in mathematics and reading. Only about 30 percent of the students in these states score at the "proficient" (good enough) level on the National Assessment.

In the comparisons between state standards and the standards for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, there is room for discussion and debate about the differences. For example, the "curriculum frameworks" for the National Assessment and those for the states have much in common but they do not match exactly, and the National Assessment tests and the state tests are not the same, even though they test the same subjects and grades. A few states are setting standards as high as the National Assessment "proficient" (good enough) standard, but most states have standards that appear to be lower. The point of the comparison between state assessments and the National Assessment isn't that the National Assessment standards are "too high" or that the state standards are "too low." The point is that the standards in many cases are so different that state leaders and those in charge of the National Assessment need to be around the same table seeking to understand the differences and whether changes are needed.

You might think that states and the National Assessment would have already had conversations about these large differences. You would be mostly wrong.

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Is Comparing State Performance Standards of Student Achievement Like Comparing Apples and Oranges?

Do the dramatic differences among state performance standards for student achievement and the equally dramatic differences between state standards and the standards for the National Assessment of Educational Progress mean we are "comparing apples and oranges?" Some may seek to dismiss these comparisons by saying that they are comparing different things, but do not accept this simplistic brush-off.

The states listed in Tables 1 and 2 all describe their performance standards for student achievement in ways that citizens and parents will interpret as being "pretty good" and certainly as being "beyond minimum competency." None of these states uses the term "minimum" or similar terms to describe the performance standards included in their reports. All of the standards included here are described as "proficient," "adequate and acceptable," "satisfactory," "clear competence," "mastering grade-level subject matter" or "meeting the state goal or standard." In some cases the "state goal" is not defined, and when nearly 90 percent of students meet the state goal, one might conclude that it is a low or minimum standard. But if the state's *goal* is for students to reach a ***minimum*** level of performance, then this is a matter of more serious consequence for the state's citizens than arguing about whether we are "comparing apples and oranges."

Some States Do Have High Performance Standards for Student Achievement

A few states have set high standards, and state leaders have shown courage as they shifted from minimum competency tests (where well over 90 percent of students "passed") to high standards and challenging tests where only 30 percent to 40 percent are currently meeting the performance standards for student achievement. Kentucky and Maryland are among the first states to move to high standards. So are Connecticut and Delaware, and New Hampshire is implementing a new assessment program with high standards. Generally, high performance standards for student achievement are part of an overall effort to improve instruction, increase the content of what is taught, and develop rigorous tests that measure progress toward high standards.

Many Tests with "High Stakes" Have Had "Low Standards"

When consequences, or "high stakes," have been attached to tests, states have generally set low standards for these tests. There is now much talk of high standards *and* high stakes, but for most states this would be a dramatic change.

High school graduation tests are probably the best example of high stakes and low standards. When states have required that a test must be passed to earn a high school diploma, nearly every state has pegged the high school graduation test at a ninth grade level, or less, resulting in typical passing rates of well over 90 percent.

Stakes can also be high for schools. Several states have established "rewards and sanctions" programs, intended to hold school boards, superintendents, principals and teachers more accountable. But these high stakes are also generally linked to low standards. Consider a typical example: One state identified 4 percent of its school districts for potential sanctions because they failed to meet a student performance stan-

Table 2
States with Performance Standards for Third and Fourth Graders Compared with National Assessment Results for Fourth Graders in the Same States (Reading)

State	Percent of Students Meeting State Proficiency Standard * 1994-1995	Percent of Fourth Grade Students Meeting National Assessment Proficient Standard 1994
Connecticut	48	38
Delaware	11 (3rd Grade)	23
Georgia	67 (3rd Grade)	26
Illinois	74 (3rd Grade)	NA
Kentucky	30	26
Louisiana	88 (3rd Grade)	15
Maryland	39 (3rd Grade)	26
Michigan	50	NA
New Hampshire	29 (3rd Grade)	36
North Carolina	65	30
Ohio	83 (3rd Grade)	NA
Oregon	89	NA
South Carolina	82 (3rd Grade)	20
Tennessee	62	27
Wisconsin	88 (3rd Grade)	35

* See page 7 for definition of proficiency standards.

dard that required them to have no more than *half* of their students in the bottom one-fourth on the state's testing scale. This is a *low* standard.

High stakes *and* high standards—few states have yet been willing to take this path.

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International Results on Student Achievement Can Tell the Nation and Individual States Something Important About How High Their Standards Are . . . *And Soon*

World Class Standards. Many American educators, parents and elected officials say they want them, although few can tell you what they are. When you hear about international tests, the news often seems to be that American students trail students in other industrialized nations, especially in mathematics. You hear less often that America's fourth graders and eighth graders read comparatively well when tested along with students in other industrialized nations.

The Third International Mathematics and Science Survey will report results on fourth and eighth graders in more than 30 countries. In a few months, we will learn what percentage of students in these other nations are meeting our National Assessment of Educational Progress performance standards of "basic" and "proficient," and we will be able to compare other nations' scores with U.S. results. States that participate in the National Assessment program can also compare the results for their students to those in more than 30 countries around the world.

The International Mathematics and Science results will give us a way of knowing more about "World Class Standards" and allow us to talk about them in real terms.

Can We Talk? Will We Talk? States Can Share Information About Standards and About the Process They Used to Set Standards

With most states now setting or revising student achievement standards for students in elementary and secondary schools there is, of course, some sharing of information, but it is less than you think.

The truth is that the kind of sharing that is needed won't just "happen." Leadership is required to bring state policy makers together around these issues, both to share their own experiences with performance standards and to compare and discuss the wide differences in results. Sooner rather than later, parents, civic and business leaders, and the media are going to begin asking hard questions about the bewildering range of results and the dramatic differences from state to state in what is "good enough" for our students to know and be able to do.

Frankly, we need to ask questions about why states apparently have such dramatically different expectations about how much students should learn in the basic subjects such as reading and mathematics, where we should all want high standards. Exactly what is it that states with high standards expect students to learn in reading and mathematics, and how is this different from what states with lower standards expect? The children and young people (and eventually all of us) will be the losers if we don't get our standards right and then dedicate ourselves to reach them. Now is the time to answer these questions.

State Performance Standards for Student Achievement

These definitions are those used for mathematics and reading in Tables 1 and 2.

These states test students in reading at grades three or four and in mathematics at grade seven or eight and have performance standards not described as "minimum expectation."

Connecticut: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state goal.

Delaware: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state standard (Level 1).

Georgia: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the "adequate and acceptable" performance standard.

Illinois: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state goal (Levels 2 and 3).

Kentucky: The percentage of students at the "proficient" and "distinguished" levels.

Louisiana: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state goal.

Maryland: The percentage of students meeting the "satisfactory " or "excellent" standard.

Michigan: The percentage of students meeting the "satisfactory" standard.

New Hampshire: The percentage of students at the "proficient" and "advanced" levels.

New Jersey: The percentage of students showing "clear competence" (Level 1).

North Carolina: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding Level III (mastery of grade level subject matter and skills).

Ohio: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the "proficient" level.

Oklahoma: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the "satisfactory" level.

Oregon: The percentage of students at the "proficient" and "advanced" levels.

South Carolina: The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state standard.

Tennessee: The percentage of students performing at the "mastery" level.

Wisconsin: The percentage of students scoring "above the performance standard."

July 1996

Source: These definitions and the information for Tables 1 and 2 are from the *Profile of 1994-95 State Assessment Systems and Reported Results* by the National Education Goals Panel, Washington DC, June 1996.

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